DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 381 837 CS 508 904

AUTHOR Carr, John C.
TITLE The Who's "Tommy." Spotlight on Theater Notes.
INSTITUTION John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, Washington, D.C.
SPONS AGENCY Department of Education, Washington, DC.
PUB DATE [95]
NOTE 9p.; Produced by the Performance Plus Program, Kennedy Center Education Department. Funding also provided by the Kennedy Center Corporate Fund. For other guides in this series, see CS 508 902-906.
PUB TYPE Guides - General (050)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Acting; *Cultural Enrichment; *Drama; Higher Education; Interviews; *Playwriting; Popular Culture; *Rock Music; Secondary Education
IDENTIFIERS Historical Background; Musicals; *Tommy (Rock Opera)

ABSTRACT

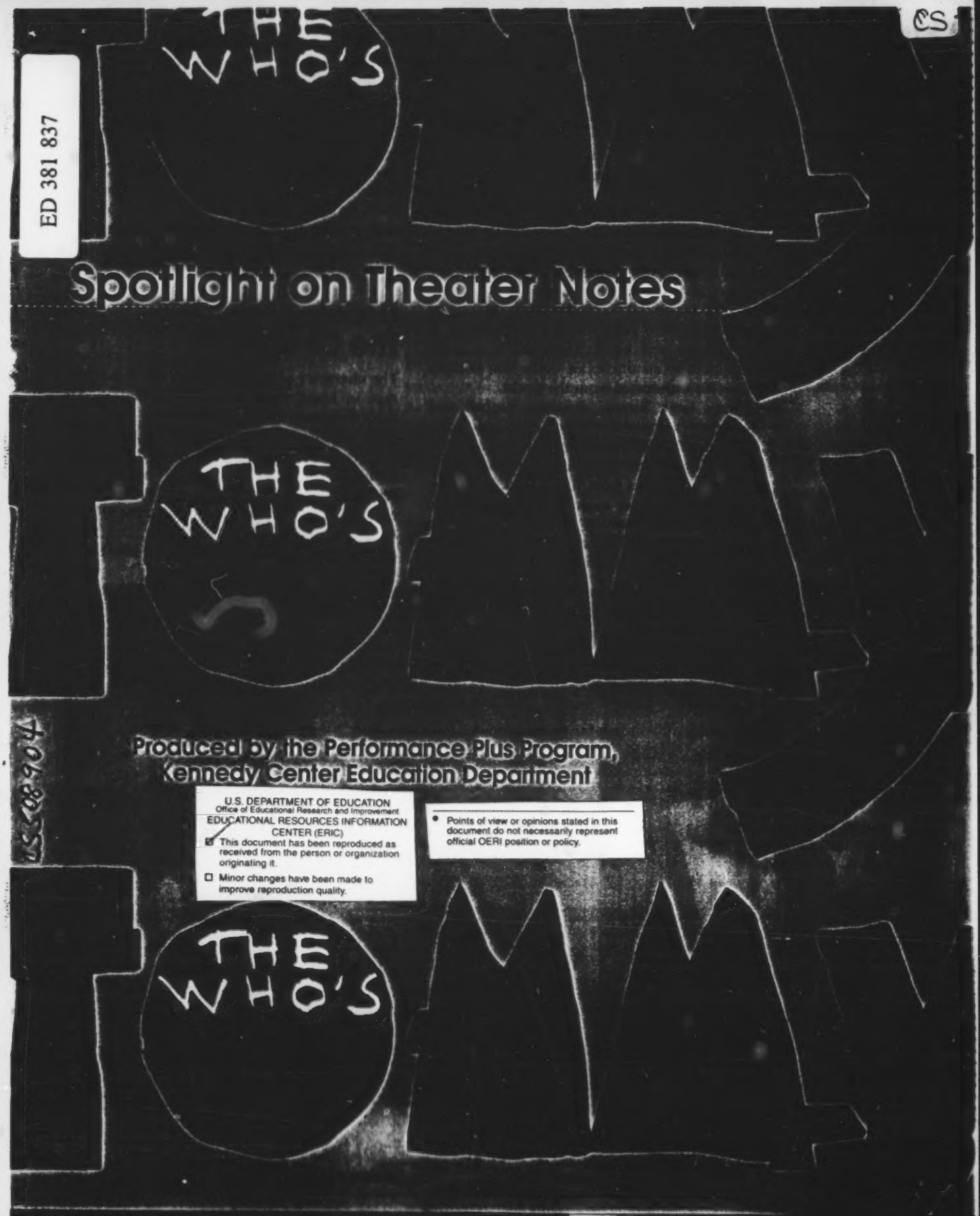
This booklet presents a variety of materials concerning The Who's rock opera "Tommy." The booklet discusses the plot, the character of Tommy, highlights of "Tommy"'s 25-year history, the evolution of "Tommy," biographical information on the producer, director, actors and designers, awards won by the rock opera, "Tommy"'s statement about power, and "Tommy" as high-tech theater. (RS)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED 381 837

CS

Spotlight on Theater Notes



Produced by the Performance Plus Program,
Kennedy Center Education Department

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

US 98904

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Tommy: The Story

Tommy is a story of alienation, the consequences of celebrity, and finally, the healing powers of reconciliation.

In the current treatment of The Who's 25-year-old rock opera, the story is told with a minimum of dialogue. We follow the story's characters and events through songs, dance, and the new wizardry of stage technology.

The title character is the musical's central figure. When Tommy is four, his father returns from a World War II prisoner-of-war camp, discovers his wife with her lover, and kills him. Tommy witnesses the murder; the trauma of the experience causes him to become deaf, speechless, and blind. Later, he is sexually assaulted by an uncle, an event that complicates his withdrawal from the world.

Years later Tommy discovers pinball and becomes a neighborhood champion, the "Pinball Wizard," yet his illness remains a mystery no doctor can cure. At 20, on his own, he suddenly emerges from his trauma. The news of the miracle cure spreads like wild fire but, ironically, his elevation to celebrity and the adulation of his fans alienates him further. Unwillingly he assumes a messiah-like position.

He uses his fame to express his long-repressed rage but begins to resolve it when a fan is hurt because of him.

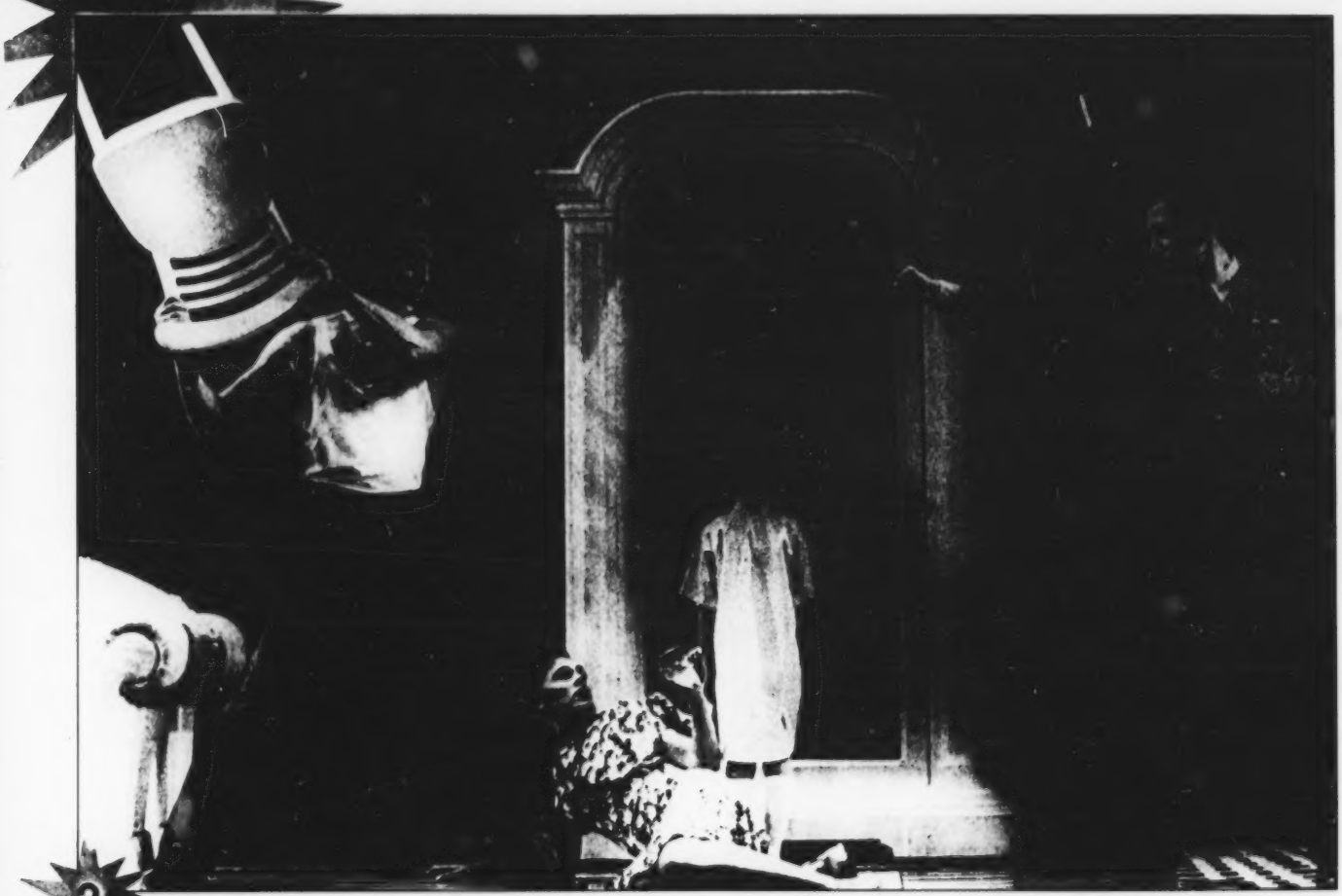
His great turning point occurs when he refuses to give his disciples easy spiritual answers and they in turn abandon him. On the verge of returning to his former withdrawn state, he recognizes the need to risk emotional engagement with his family and returns to them in an act of reconciliation.

Defining Tommy: The Character

The character of Tommy is very much a *tabula rasa*, or blank slate, on which audiences can write their own interpretations.

During much of the show's action, he is, as a song lyric describes him, a "deaf, dumb, and blind kid." He reveals little and little is revealed about him. Throughout the show his essential personality is ambiguous. He is both a boy and man of mystery.

Tommy is who and what you want him to be.



What's In Tommy's Name?

Pete Townshend is straightforward about the fact that the name Tommy was chosen for its resonance.

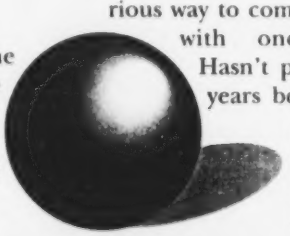
Tommy is a common British name, but it is also the name by which privates in the British Army are called, just as American G.I.s are called Joe.

Townshend also invites us to hear in the name "to me," which he says is the direction of the musical's action: toward Tommy.

Townshend, a devotee of guru Meher Baba, attaches significance to the letters "o-m" in Tommy, seeing and hearing them as "om," the standard sound used as a mantra in Eastern meditation. When *Tommy* was written in the late 1960s, "om" was well known, particularly among those in the counterculture. The sound is employed as a symbol of spiritual centeredness and peace. Tommy's last name is Walker, which well suits a character in search of himself.

While their names are different, Tommy and Pete Townshend share some similarities. Townshend says that recently he has begun to see autobiographical elements in the musical. In addition to his observation that he always wrote in the voice of "a guy who was 15 or 16 in (London's) Shepherd's Bush in 1964," Townshend also acknowledges that he was influenced in his writing by an upsetting childhood experience with one of his father's friends. Certainly the rebellious tone of his music and the destruction of instruments that was integral to live performances with The Who also speaks of emotional turbulence seeking release.

Who?



In case you've been out of town since the mid-'60s, the rock music group The Who was formed in 1965 and promptly set about creating one of the major legends of popular music. A distinguishing characteristic of a Who concert was its ending, in which the performers destroyed their instruments, an activity technically known as autodestruction. Coming as the climax of an already rebellious performance, the violence became the group's resounding message of anarchy.

Before The Who there was the Detours, a group composed of Pete Townshend (lyricist and guitarist), Roger Daltrey (lead singer), and John Entwistle (bassist). Seeking another image, the group added a drummer (Keith Moon) and changed its name to The Who. Moon died in 1978 and was replaced by Kenney Jones. The Who disbanded in 1982.

Why Pinball?

Is there special meaning to the fact that Tommy becomes the "Pinball Wizard"? From an existential viewpoint, the pinball game might be seen as a metaphor for life. A ball is let loose on a hazardous course, bounces from "bumper" to "bumper," and ultimately rolls out of the game and is replaced by another ball. The same view raises two questions: "What's the point: a high score?" and "So what?" Those questions seem to align themselves with those that Tommy himself confronts.

Is pinball a metaphor for rock and roll? Perhaps. After all, Tommy and his disciples use the game as a mysterious way to communicate with one another. Hasn't popular music of the last 40 years been used that way by young people eager to share messages that older people may find threatening or incomprehensible?

25 Years of *Tommy*: Some Highlights

1969

The Who provide a press premiere of the music in London.

The Who perform *Tommy* at Woodstock.

1970

The recording of *Tommy* becomes a hit.

The Who perform *Tommy* at the Metropolitan Opera.

1972

A dance version of *Tommy* by Les Grands Ballets Canadiens plays the Kennedy Center's Opera House.

1975

Ken Russell's film treatment of *Tommy* appears.

1993

The Who's Tommy opens on Broadway, winning five Tony Awards.

1994

The new *Tommy* plays the Opera House.

Tommy: The Evolution

Tommy is one of the cultural phenomena of the last generation. It began life as a record album and has evolved through various forms to the full-fledged staged musical that will fill the Opera House for five weeks.

"Rock opera" was new terminology in 1969 when The Who recorded *Tommy*. By the following year, the popularity of the album made

it clear that audiences wanted live concert presentations of the piece. And so The Who toured the opera houses of Cologne, West Berlin, Hamburg, Copenhagen, and Amsterdam to cheering acclaim. Finally, the group performed an intended "final" concert at New York's Metropolitan Opera House.

In 1971 and '72, concerts which included other rock stars were given. In the mid 1970s a version appeared in Los Angeles and on tour in Australia. A *Tommy* revue was produced in London's West End in 1978.

The infamous Ken Russell film version of *Tommy* appeared in 1975, featuring Ann-Margret, Tina Turner, Jack Nicholson, Eric Clapton, Elton John, and The Who's Roger Daltrey. Les Grands Ballets Canadiens mounted a dance interpretation of *Tommy* in 1971.

The current, revised, and fully staged version of *Tommy* opened at California's La Jolla Playhouse in early 1993 before moving on to Broadway that April.

The Opera House production is nearing the end of a 15- month tour. Before its Washington appearance the cast has performed in more than 30 cities, including Chicago, Boston, San Francisco, Los Angeles, Dallas, Houston, Atlanta, and Philadelphia.

Following Washington, the company will play an engagement in Nashville.

Tommy's "Father": Pete Townshend

Tommy's composer, lyricist, and co-author Pete Townshend is frequently faced with the question: why another version of a work he created 25 years ago?

Speaking to writer Michael Goldstein, Townshend confessed, "The most pressing reason is my personal drive to move into musical theater. I've waited a long time, sitting on various rights like a mother hen, for some sign that the public is ready to fill theaters to see my shows rather than sheds to see The Who."*

Beyond that Townshend explains that *Tommy* still had some distance to go to be fully satisfying. He says that this version is the "definitive" one.

Another reason Townshend accepted the challenge to re-work *Tommy* is the show's rhythm. "There is a real desire," he says, "even among theatergoers delighting in shows like *Phantom, Cats,* and *Les Miz,* to be exposed to musicals based on the basic percussion rhythms of this age. We drive to drums, make love to drums, and cook and eat to drums. They are simply everywhere. Everywhere except great music theater."

Townshend is, of course, a legendary rocker and the driving force behind The Who. He was the group's song writer and guitarist from 1962 until the band broke up in 1982. He has written hundreds of songs, at least 20 of which have hit the top of the charts.

Townshend admits that he and the other members of The Who—Roger Daltrey, John Entwistle, Keith Moon—originally saw *Tommy* as an attempt to make something "so gross, so pretentious, so *dangerous* that we'[d] get respect and attention."**

Prominent as a pop icon in the counterculture of the '60s and '70s, Townshend thrived on the practice of autodestruction in which he and the other band members destroyed their instruments at the end of a concert. In part, *Tommy* came out of that effort to express the rebellion of adolescence. The anti-all-authority cry of the period had been heard earlier in his songs "My Generation," "Substitute," "I Can't Explain," and "I Can See for Miles," but it

* *Theater Week,* April 26-May 2, 1993

** *Playbill,* August, 1993

found its focus in the song cycle, or if you prefer, rock opera called *Tommy*.

Townshend has not wanted for recognition. He has been nominated for two Grammys and an Oscar (for the score of *Tommy*), and received the 1993 Tony Award for Best Original Score (also for *Tommy*). He's been recognized with the International Rock Life Achievement Award and inducted into the Rock-and-Roll Hall of Fame.

Townshend is riding on a new wave of acclaim for his 25-year-old brainchild. Old fans are finding new meaning in *Tommy*, while new ones see it as an emotional haven in an increasingly difficult world.

Director/Co-Author: Des McAnuff

Des McAnuff, *Tommy*'s powerhouse director and co-author, is a man whose time has come. With this show he has helped push, pull, and drag musical theater toward the 21st century.

"The theatre is often reactionary," he says. "Look at its history. First it was, 'We don't want candles, we want the sun.' Then, 'We don't want lights, we want candles.' The tradition of Sondheim and Loesser will continue, but I want to demystify the theater and welcome in other composers who've been on the charts.... Theatre is an ongoing evolution."*

In addition to co-authoring this 25th anniversary production of *Tommy*, McAnuff has brought to it as director a visceral tension and vibrancy of movement.

One of McAnuff's notions—that rock-and-roll's controlled explosion of rage was a release for the devastating emotional impact of Hitler's evil—subtextually informs numerous aspects of the show in its current form.

At the moment, McAnuff is directing the new Broadway-bound production of *How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying*, starring Matthew Broderick, which opens a four-week Opera House run in January. He recently was the artistic director of California's La Jolla Playhouse, a position he held for more than 10 years. He has also directed in numerous other venues, including at the Stratford (Canada) Festival.

For his directorial contributions to *Tommy*, McAnuff received the 1993 Tony, Drama Desk, and Outer Critics Circle awards. Earlier he received a Tony for his direction of the musical *Big River*, seen in the Opera House in 1986.

In addition to a roster of plays at La Jolla, he also directed Lee Blessing's *A Walk in the Woods* on Broadway and for tour in Russia and Lithuania.

Not content with an already-hectic schedule, McAnuff has been a member of the faculty of New York's Juilliard School and is now an adjunct professor at the University of California-San Diego.

Choreographer Wayne Cilento

The distance from the Bronx to Broadway is not so great. But for Bronx-born choreographer Wayne Cilento, who has made the journey, it might just as well be thousands of miles. It wasn't until he was a teenager and landed a role in a high school musical that he discovered dance. That was in Westchester, which in career terms, made it a little closer to Broadway.

Cilento got still closer to the Bright Lights when he realized in college that what he wanted to study was professional dancing and not pharmacy. Summer stock and other showbiz jobs followed. And then, suddenly, the distance between the Bronx and Broadway was bridged: a successful audition for the original company of *A Chorus Line*. He was one of the

* *Theater Week*, April 26-May 2, 1993

show's standouts, singing "I Can Do That."

Soon he was choreographing television commercials and sometimes performing in them. More choreography followed, but so did another show-stopping role, this one in Bob Fosse's *Dancin'*. After that it was back and forth between performing and choreographing.

Finally, *Tommy* came along. The results not only produced audience cheers but earned him the 1993 Tony and Drama Desk awards.

The uniqueness of his work in *Tommy* is the way the dances flow through and around the story. Cilento points out that the *Tommy* experience was a new one for him because "it came out of a scene and then expanded—blew up. Then it went right back into the scene and moved along."*

Working with Director Des McAnuff was not new, though. The two had worked on a national tour of *Chess* and on a production of *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* at the La Jolla Playhouse. Currently they've reunited for the upcoming *How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying*. It didn't take much time for Cilento to say yes to McAnuff's request that he provide the movement for *Tommy*. "I was excited about it because it was rock-and-roll and it wasn't a revival.... I'm a younger generation and I wanted to do something different and new. I knew it would be fun and right up our alley because it's rock-and-roll."*

*Dance Pages Magazine, Summer, 1993.

Wow! What a Look!

Many of the awards *Tommy* has received are for the show's unique look. "The designers are as much the stars of the production as the music, actors, or director," is the way a *Los Angeles Times* review put it.

John Arnone's scenery, Wendall K. Harrington's projections, David C. Woolard's costumes, and Chris Parry's lighting relate to and support one another to an unusually high degree. Videos created by Batwin and Robin Productions and sound provided by Steve Canyon Kennedy contribute further to a total, stunning effect.

Reviewing *Tommy* for *The New York Times*, Frank Rich observed that its theatrical style "coalesces as a continuous wave of songs, scenes, kaleidoscopic design and dance." While director Des McAnuff and choreographer Wayne Cilento conceived the "continuous wave" Rich describes, the credit must be shared with *Tommy's* design team.

John Arnone received all three of the major theater awards for his design for *Tommy*—the Tony, the Drama Desk, and the Outer Critics Circle Award. He has designed for major producers, directors, and theater and dance companies throughout the country. He designed the sets for the new *How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying*. Among his other recognitions are the American Theatre Wing Award and two Obies.

Wendall K. Harrington has made major contributions to such shows as *The Heidi Chronicles*, *The Will Rogers Follies*, and *My One and Only*, all of which have played at the Kennedy Center. She was the producer of "Words on Fire" shown on PBS.

David C. Woolard's work has been seen at the Kennedy Center in *A Few Good Men*. Other work includes the recent off-Broadway hit *Jeffrey*. He has worked widely in the country's regional theaters, including the La Jolla Playhouse, where the current production of *Tommy* originated.

Chris Parry received the Tony Award for his lighting design for *Tommy*. He has designed numerous productions for Great Britain's Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC) as well as for London's National Theatre. His designs for the RSC production of *The Winter's Tale* were admired at the Kennedy Center last season. A teacher of lighting design at the University of Southern California, San Diego, he also designs productions throughout the United States.

Linda Batwin and Robin Silvestri are the directors of Batwin and Robin Productions, a multimedia design company. They have pro-

duced and staged numerous films, exhibit videos, theater, corporate, and publicity events over the last 12 years.

Steve Canyon Kennedy has been a production sound engineer for such shows as *Cats*, *Starlight Express*, *The Phantom of the Opera*, and *Aspects of Love*.

Tommy's Statement About Power

The power of a messiah-like figure and the possibilities of how that power may be used are strong thematic elements in *Tommy*. The essential issue has little to do with good or evil but a great deal to do with trust and distrust of authority.

The anti-authority stance of the counterculture of the 1960s (remember "Don't trust anyone over 30"?) flavors this aspect of *Tommy*. It is helpful to bear in mind that Townshend was a member of the counterculture and that, additionally, he was one of the first rock stars to embrace Eastern spiritual philosophy. It also helps to explain the current ending of *Tommy* to know that Townshend is a devotee of guru Meher Baba (which means "compassionate father"). A teacher in the Sufi tradition, Meher Baba embraced followers of all life styles and faiths.

As in Eastern philosophy, *Tommy* demonstrates that enlightenment of the mind and soul never comes from the outside, regardless of the beneficence or wisdom of the source. Tommy ultimately recognizes that he must reject the temptation to control others. At the same time, he forgives his abusive family and seeks fulfillment and harmony with them.

Tommy seems to embrace with Townshend the concept most associated with Meher Baba. "Don't worry. Be happy."

Tommy: Shifting Time Periods

In the current production of *Tommy*, the action ranges from the end of World War II to 1963—approximately 20 years. This is a shift from the setting of the 1969 album, which ranged from the end of World War I through several decades of the century.

The shift forward, emphasizing the '50s, allows the show's characters and events to be interpreted against a background of social complacency in Britain, a background that also includes the decline of international power. *Tommy*'s themes are underscored with the realization that the sun was, at last, setting on the British Empire.

Director Des McAnuff explains another aspect of the change from several decades to a 20-year period. Moving from the song cycle nature of the album to a fully conceived musical required that the action take on a stronger narrative line. The consequence was a slowing down of Tommy's ascent to fame so that his climactic, self-confrontation takes on a greater believability and delivers a stronger emotional impact.

Three Tommys

Tommy takes place over a 20-year period, from the early 1940s until about 1963.

To show aspects of Tommy's development, three actors portray Tommy at ages 4, 10, and 20. Occasionally they interact with one another to demonstrate inquiring aspects of his personality and the impact of his accumulating experiences. Ultimately, the three Tommys lead to the character's self-connection and to the acceptance that permits him to return to his family.

What's In a (Play) Name?

From *Antigone* to *Julius Caesar* to *Hedda Gabler* to *Mame*: names as play titles have a long history. How many of the following name-play titles do you know? How many have played at the Kennedy Center?
(Answers on page 8.)

1. Stephen Sondheim's adaptation of this 19th-century melodrama was showered with Tony Awards.

2. Hershel Bernardi originated the title role of this 1968 musical. John Raitt played the role on its first tour. Anthony Quinn did the honors for a later tour.

3. This Jerry Herman musical examined the troubled relationship between a silent film star and her director-lover.

4. This bittersweet comedy is the second play in Preston Jones' *A Texas Trilogy*.

5. Zoe Caldwell drew rave reviews for her performance in this monodrama about one of this century's renowned American female writers.

6. This monodrama about a great African-American singer and actor starred Avery Brooks.

7. William Shakespeare wrote this history play about a "bottled spider" with his fellow actor, Richard Burbage, in mind.

8. Robert Morse seemed to be a double for the real-life writer he played in this monodrama.

9. Dorothy Loudon, who played in flop after flop, finally got a big hit with this long-running musical.

10. This play by Sophocles is sometimes called "the perfect tragedy."

Answers to Play Quiz, page 7.

1. *Sweeney Todd*
2. *Zorba*
3. *Mack and Mabel*
4. *Lu Ann Hampton Laverty Oberlander*
5. *Lillian*
6. *Paul Robeson*
7. *Richard III*
8. *Tru*
9. *Annie*
10. *Oedipus Rex*

All of the shows have played at the Kennedy Center.

Give yourself two points for each correct answer. Total: 20 points.

20-18: You get your name over the title.

17-14: You get your name just below the title.

13-9: Your name is featured.

8-5: Your name is among the spear carriers.

4-0: There is virtue in anonymity.

The Spotlight On Theater discussion will be held on Thursday, January 5, from 6:15-7 p.m. in the Kennedy Center's Opera House.

Writer: John C. Carr

Production photos: Marcus/Bryan Brown

Tommy as High Tech Theater

"Sprinting to the cutting edge of high-tech theater, *Tommy* stimulates the senses you didn't know you had."

—David Patrick Stearns, *USA Today*

The effect Stearns describes is created in large part through highly sophisticated stage technology developed over the last 20 years.

Thirteen personal computers exercise much of the control of *Tommy* behind the scenes. The computers trigger thousands of video projections and slide an array of the show's flying props into position. Twenty-seven slide projectors aim at a 30-foot-wide screen, registering a barrage of images—all of which can be frozen on screen to make a backdrop or can be flashed so quickly they create a sense of motion.

There are 375 lights arranged in five tiers. Some of them, also controlled by computer, are "robotic," rotating and changing colors as well as following performers automatically.

A video tower, with 36-inch screens, projects images from a laserdisc. The screens sometimes show live images shot from on-stage.

Fire, haze, and fog contribute to what director Des McAnuff describes as an overall hallucinogenic effect.

How about people? Sixty-five of them are required behind the scenes to make *Tommy* work. Property, wardrobe, wig, and makeup personnel, stage managers, computer, and projection operators, as well as stage hands and carpenters, tend to the show's demands.

The Kennedy Center

JAMES D. WOLFENSOHN, CHAIRMAN
LAWRENCE J. WILKER, PRESIDENT
DEREK E. GORDON, ASSOCIATE MANAGING DIRECTOR FOR EDUCATION

Funding of the Performance Plus program is provided by the U.S. Department of Education and the Kennedy Center Corporate Fund.

Tommy's Star: Steve Isaacs

Heading *Tommy*'s cast of 30 is Steve Isaacs, widely known to viewers of MTV.

Rewind: A native of California, Isaacs graduated from Hollywood's Musicians Institute. Using the name "Sparky," he performed and hosted shows extensively on the popular coffeehouse scene of Los Angeles.

Fast forward 1: Discovered by MTV (the video channel), Isaacs quickly became a popular veejay— the video equivalent of a radio disc jockey. "MTV was a real mixed blessing," Isaacs says. "It was really fun for a while, but fame was the worst thing that could happen to me. I was a veejay on MTV, making pretty good money, people were dreaming of having my life, and I was more unhappy than I've been in my whole life."

Fast forward 2: Isaacs left MTV to tour with his band, American Psycho, until it broke up in 1993.

Fast forward 3: Asked to audition for *Tommy*, he proved to be the right man in the right place.

Play: Ta-Da: Steve Isaacs in *Tommy*!

The Who's Tommy as prize winner

Opening in April 1993, at New York's St. James Theater (where it is approaching its 700th performance), *Tommy* was just in time to claim 14 prestigious theater awards for the 1992-93 season.

Its five Tony Awards include:
- Best Score
- Best Director
- Best Choreography
- Best Scenic Design
- Best Lighting Design

Six Drama Desk Awards were received for:
- Best Director
- Best Orchestrations
- Best Choreography
- Best Set Design
- Best Lighting Design
- Best Sound Design

Outer Critics Circle Awards numbered three:
- Outstanding Musical
- Outstanding Direction
- Outstanding Design